



Learning English es muy importante

Chances are good that one adult in 20 won't be able to read and comprehend this sentence. Even more people aren't able to discuss, in English, the stories on the front page of today's newspaper.

Understanding English is essential in today's world. As debate ratchets up over federal immigration reform, where language-ability mandates have been one of many sticking points, more must be done to provide classes for those who speak other languages and desperately want to learn English.

Montgomery County has one of the most diverse populations in the state, and we celebrate that fact. It makes for a stronger, more vibrant community. The U.S. Census Bureau calculates that 28 percent of the county's 900,000-plus residents are foreign born; students from 163 countries are enrolled in the public schools here.

Yet there is a chronic problem assimilating recent immigrants into the society because some can't speak enough English to handle simple tasks.

A finding in the Census Bureau's 2003 American Community Survey is quite revealing: Of people over 5 years old in Montgomery County, one-third spoke a language other than English at home and of those, 37 percent said they didn't speak English "very well."

The Montgomery Coalition for Adult Literacy and

OUR OPINION

English for Speakers of Other Languages estimates there are more than 100,000 adults in the county lacking the basic skills in English to move up in their jobs, help their children with schoolwork and take part in community life.

About 2,200 people are on wait-lists for ESOL — English as a Second Language — classes in Montgomery County. Earlier this week, two County Council members called for more funding over the next three years to help erase those names.

They've suggested that an additional \$300,000 be included in the county's budget starting this summer, enough to provide classes for about 600 people. The proposal from Democrats Thomas E. Perez of Takoma Park and Marilyn J. Praisner of Calverton is a modest, necessary one that will allow a sustained commitment, allowing some catch up.

More dollars also are needed in state and federal programs to advance basic and remedial English classes.

Pressures remain on the myriad programs that help people learn English, from informal conversation clubs at public libraries to structured classes in public schools and colleges, and one-on-one literacy tutors who meet with their students in community centers, churches and even some businesses. (Nearly 13,000 of the 139,387 public school students in the county are enrolled in

ESOL programs.)

In these times of greater demand, one organization — the Literacy Council of Montgomery County — noted that volunteerism in 2005 was at its lowest level since 2001, according to the Wheaton-based group's annual report, putting more strain on the volunteers and other public and private programs. During the year, the council taught 773 adults with 478 active tutors — about the same level of work as a year earlier with fewer volunteers.

There has been some progress — or, put another way, little erosion, in English-language training over the years nationally. The federal Department of Education, in a 2005 National Assessment of Adult Literacy report, found most literacy skills were about the same as they were a decade earlier but that about 5 percent of all adults are "non-literate" in English.

One component of an immigration-reform proposal before the U.S. Senate requires English-language proficiency as part of the process to qualify for a temporary visa, which would allow millions of workers already in the country to stay and continue along a path toward full citizenship.

More so than ever, in today's diverse world there is a practical need to be able to read, write and speak in English. Delaying or retarding immersion of non-English speakers does little good, for them or for our society.